

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Writing Curricular Calendar, Sixth Grade, 2012-2013
Unit Four - Persuasive Essay: Constructing Compelling Arguments

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Unit Four – Persuasive Essay: Constructing Compelling Arguments

January

Our students are not short on opinions: what to wear, which music is cool, what is simply “unfair.” Adolescents we have talked with sometimes feel, however, that they are unheard, that the adults in their lives do not take them seriously. They say they have a lot to offer their schools, their communities, our world, but to adult ears these opinions come off as just complaining. Part of this is due to the fact that sometimes their (or even adults’) opinions come off more as a list of demands or a complaining rant than as thoughtful suggestions or evidence-based argument. The ability to not just have an opinion, but to support it clearly and persuasively, is a powerful life skill. Entire industries are built around convincing the public that this politician is the one to trust, or this car is the one to buy, or this cause is worth fighting for.

The work of the RWP Persuasive Essay unit is simultaneously personal and academic. Personal because it will draw on the concerns, ideas, and experiences of our students, academic because it is very difficult to be persuasive without outside resources to back you up and an authoritative voice in which to assert your claims. In this unit you will push your students to reflect, to research, to read closely and to write powerfully in order to assert their views on critical issues in their lives.

What Standards This Unit Addresses

This unit addresses the sum total of Common Core State Standard 6.1. In the Appendix of the Common Core, the authors cite research showing that the ability to write arguments is essential to success in college and the workforce, devoting time and space to explaining “The Special Place of Argument in the Standards” (CCSS, Appendix A, p. 24). First and foremost it grapples with the idea of having an argument as your claim rather than an opinion. The difference here is nuance but significant. For my claim to be an opinion, I simply have to believe it to be true. Whereas for my claim to be an argument, there must be others who could, or do, disagree. This requires that I persuade as opposed to simply support. In addition, this unit asks writers to organize their reasons and evidence clearly, and to “support claim(s) with clear reasons and relevant evidence, using credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text” (Standard 1b). This means that while we will hold onto what students have learned before about essay writing—namely that our reasons and evidence need to be structured in a way that makes sense to the reader and that support our claims, but it also means that in this unit and in the spirit of the persuasive essay, we will fold in some research to be sure that students are using and evaluating outside sources in their writing.

In addition, in asking students to begin to develop their researching skills, the unit also touches upon Standards 6.7, 6.8, and 6.9, depending on how in depth your research lessons become. These Standards ask students to research quickly, to look at sources for their credibility and their

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relevance to your claim, and draw the relevant evidence out of the text. Of course, then, we will also be teaching students to incorporate that evidence into their writing.

Use Performance Assessments to Steer Your Teaching

You will want to begin the unit by setting aside one day for an on-demand opinion writing assessment. The RWP's Common Core aligned Opinion/Argument Writing Assessment Tool will be available to you through our website. You could say to your students, "Tomorrow I'm going to give you time to show me what you already know about writing to develop and support an idea. Bring in any resources that you would want to quote from to help you write about an idea or a topic that you feel strongly about." Then the following day, you could give them this prompt: "Think of an idea or topic that you have strong feelings about. Write your opinion and give reasons that tell why you feel this way. Use everything you know about essay writing, letter writing, speeches, and reviews." Note that while you will be moving your students towards arguments rather than opinions for this assessment you will use the more familiar language of opinion to help the students show you all they know. When you tell your students about the task, don't set them up for it by quickly reviewing the characteristics of opinion writing or by otherwise trying to scaffold them to be successful with opinion writing. This is the pre-test and your hope will be that your students see themselves making giant strides during the interval between this preliminary assessment and the end-of-the-unit culminating assessment. Of course, after your students do a quick on-demand opinion essay, you will want to study what they have done so as to adjust your plans for this unit accordingly.

Have a Sense of the Trajectory of Your Students' Work Across the Entire Unit

The first part of this unit teaches students to write essays centered around an argument, and to find evidence (in part) outside of their own experience to support their claim. Then, in the second part of the unit, students will write another essay holding onto what they have learned previously and ramping up the level of their writing.

If you have a sixth grade class that is significantly below grade level, you may want to take a look at the fifth or fourth grade RWP unit and focus in on opinion writing rather than launching into argument right away. This will give your students a confidence that they then can carry into a full on persuasive essay unit, either this year or in the future. The important thing is that we are differentiating so that our students are becoming more sophisticated essay writers.

Launching the Unit

Even if your students have grown up in the RWP writing workshops, it is likely that you'll find, when you review students' on-demand writing, their on-demand essays do not demonstrate what the students were taught about essay writing during previous years' work with reviews, persuasive letters, and essays. If this is the case for your students, we recommend you start this unit by devoting a day to helping them remember the three or four most important aspects of this kind of writing that they should already know, and by then giving them the chance to spend one quick day working furiously to revise their on-demand essays.

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One good way to support this work is to, if possible, allow your students to have next to them an old essay they wrote last year, or earlier in the year. This visual aide of what the writer already knows often helps knowledge come rushing back. Be sure you keep the originals and give them duplicate copies to work on in this way as you'll want to preserve the baseline data against which you can show them their growth across the month. Instead of waiting to teach these for the first time once students are deep within the unit, you may decide to remind writers now that they already know these tips and then see if, with just some reminders, they can demonstrate abilities to do that work.

Bend One – Collecting for Essays

If this is your students' first experience in expository/essay writing, you probably will not have done the revision work described above, although you will hopefully have still devoted a day to an on-demand assessment of students' opinion writing. We at the RWP urge you to ask students to do this even if you know they will fall flat because this will allow them (and you) to later look back and see the amount of progress that they have made over the course of the unit.

In the year ahead, the RWP suggests that instead of extending the time it takes to write one essay, you consolidate it. To do this consolidation, start by deciding that you will be able to devote only the first three days (and evenings and the weekend, hopefully) to helping your students experience what it means to be the sorts of people who grow compelling, provocative arguments through the use of their writer's notebooks.

The key here during this generating stage is to help your students develop entries that hold arguments—ideas that people could or do argue about. While in sixth grade there is not a strong focus on counterargument (which comes in the Standards for seventh grade) we will want to be sure that we have given our young writers some experience with crafting arguable claims rather than simply stating and supporting their opinions.

To do this of course we first need to teach our students to search their world and their lives for issues that they care enough about to enter into arguments with others. We have found, in all essay units, that to find a strong claim it helps to first find a few categories of thinking that your claim might live within. And so you will want to offer your students a few ways to find the issues and ideas that bring out their strong, individual takes on the world. One way to do this to create an issue wall with your students. At the start of class, stand with a piece of chart paper and ask your class to turn and talk, or stop and jot, three issues that they have spent time thinking about this year. You might want to model a few first, to show them what kinds of issues you are referring to. For instance, you could write "Bullying," "Peer Pressure," and "Homework," down, naming that you have spent time observing and thinking about how these issues affect people and what we can do about them.

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In addition, you will want to open up the possibility for your students to draw upon some of the strong opinions they have encountered in their content area classes. You may have a different chart up of issues they have learned about in other classes. "Cloning," "Racism," or "Imperialism" may show up on charts like these.

Soon your students will have jotted between two to three issues that mean something to them. Begin collecting these on your chart, and as students name an issue out loud, ask the rest of the class to raise their hands or give a thumbs-up if they care about that issue as well. This way you and your students will start to see what the hot issues of the day are for your particular group of kids. As your chart becomes full, take a step back and congratulate your class on being such thoughtful, concerned citizens. Explain that in this unit, they are going to try and convince someone to believe as they believe, someone who disagrees with their view of an issue.

You could use this time as a drum roll for your unit—a time to celebrate ahead of time the great work your class will be doing. Some teachers have looked at the power of persuasive writing and how it has, quite truly, changed the world. One RWP colleague referred to scenes from the HBO series *John Adams*, when the founding fathers debated for days and weeks over issues of the day, and how the result—after hour upon hour of argument—was our constitution. Others look at current speeches that have transformed people's views, whether it be Barack Obama's speech in South Carolina or Steve Jobs' at his shareholders' meeting introducing the iPad.

In any case, as students collect issues on the chart, you might ask them to decide which of those issues seem the most urgent for them to write about. In other words, you will tell them that when we write persuasively, we are usually writing about things that matter *now*, in this moment or this place. Ask students to rank the top three issues on the chart for themselves, in order of significance. This way, students will enter into the unit armed with topics they care about.

You could, as some alternate ways to teach your class to generate ideas, have your students lists "Things I Wish I Could Change," or to write entries about the last time they were angry, or felt something was unfair, and to think about what could have changed in that moment.

Either way, soon your students will have notebooks pages crammed with lists of issues. Of course you will not want to rest here—a vital part of growing ideas in our notebooks is to focus on the growth part of the equation, and so once you have some good lists and entries going, you might have students focus on some ways to take one of the issues they care about, and write in order to complicate, deepen and refine their thinking.

Some ways to do this elaboration work might be very familiar to your students. You may, for example, lean on the thought prompts that many of them have learned in past years, prompts that push them to stretch their thinking down the page. These prompts include but are not limited to "I think," "For example," "This is important because," "The reason for this is," "This connects to," and "On the other hand." By using these prompts to help keep their writing (and thinking).

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going, students will find more nuanced and argumentative ideas appearing on the page before them.

Students might also mine their issues for ideas by analyzing them. To do this you could teach your students that when we analyze something, we often search it for its causes, its effects, comparisons we can make, and we can also make sure we have defined the issue are talking about clearly—that we know what it is and what it isn't.

We then can begin to teach our students to identify which ideas they have that feel like opinions, such as "Bullying is wrong," that probably cannot really be argued against (no one really argues that bullying is right) and which ideas may form the claims of persuasive essays precisely because there are other opinions out there. For example, students may realize that while their idea that "homework is a drag," is an opinion, saying "We should have less homework," is an argument, because there are many who disagree vehemently with them.

And we will also want to teach students that as they begin to zero in on arguments they are making about issues they care about, that they will want to be sure to hold on to the "boxes-and-bullets" format of writing that they, most likely, know so well. If a small group of your students are unfamiliar with boxes-and-bullets, you can certainly pull a small group and teach them that good ideas are always supported—with reasons, and with evidence, and that even as we write to think in our notebooks, we can use this structure to lay out an idea, and then look to see if we have some evidence for our thinking. If you find that most students stare blankly at you when you bring up the idea of boxes and bullets, you might consider moving to a fifth or fourth grade unit of study on essay and tailor it to fit your student's needs.

The RWP has found the important thing to emphasize during this phase of the writing process, when students are writing entries to grow ideas, is that their entries will not look like miniature essays. During this phase of the unit, your emphasis will instead be on teaching writers to free-write in their notebooks. The goal is to help kids realize the value of writing at length without a preconceived content, trusting that ideas will surface as they go along. You will be helping them write ideas that are original, provocative, interesting, fresh, and insightful. You will also help them reach for the precise words to capture their thoughts and, for your most advanced students, to use metaphors for thoughts that don't easily fit into ordinary words.

Remember, this work on elaborating and all the strategies for generating thinking will all be shoehorned into just a very small number of days early in the unit. This means that the work on thought prompts or analysis may, for example, end up as small-group work for those students needing this help. And it means that you will probably only teach one or, at the most, two strategies for generating ideas and entries.

Once this buzz is in the air, you will most likely want to fuel the fire with discussion. As students have ideas they now see as arguments to be fought for, you may want to teach them that one way

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writers prepare to argue their point is to make sure they have thought carefully about both the reasons they think they are right as well as the reasons other people may disagree with them. This means that you will be teaching your students to debate as a way to begin planning their essays. For the first part of the day, then, you will want to teach your students that sometimes a good writing partner is your fiercest critic. As your writers propose their ideas, their writing partners can take the stance of their opponent in a debate. You can model this for your class, asking a strongly verbal student or colleague to play the role of opponent. "People should stop putting only children down," you might begin, to which your writing partner will respond immediately, "Why do you say that?" "Well, because people say that only children are selfish, but that isn't always true." You have just drafted one bullet in your plan, but your writing partner is not satisfied. "Well, but sometimes they are." Now you will have to think hard about what your response will be. "That may be true," you might say, "but it's not like calling only children selfish helps them. So I guess what I am saying is you shouldn't put them down because it doesn't help them and only hurts them."

Set up your students for debate with a strong demonstration and send them off. You will, of course, need to coach some of your more reticent students. Many students will back down at the first sign of disagreement, and you will need to pump them up to assert their ideas. Remind them that the point of debate is to come up with new and better ideas, and that when we debate we are not afraid to be wrong, or to change our thinking, but we must push forth our ideas.

Bend Two – Drafting Flash Essays

After your students have debated their ideas with their writing partners, it will be time for them to focus in on a claim (or preferably two as they will be ultimately writing two essays during this unit) that they feel strongly enough about to work around on an essay. In order to do this they can go through their notebook and highlight or underline spots where they think they might have a claim. Then, you will want to teach them to take that idea and write it a few ways down the page, playing with word choice, until they have found a phrasing that is both exactly what they are trying to say and sounds persuasive enough to be a solid claim for an essay. One way that RWP classroom teachers have found success in this work is to offer the students a few models of what thesis statements look like—try putting up a chart with a few well-formed persuasive claims written on them, and then as students begin finding their own, add them to the chart. The fact is that persuasive claims sound a certain way, and it will help your students to have a few models to go off of before trying their hand at their own.

Once your class has a few good claims ready to go, your students will be ready to plan out their essays. There are, of course, a few ways to do this. One is to stick with what the kids may be most familiar with. That is to say that they could do boxes-and-bullets where the claim goes into the box, and each bullet is a reason why their claim is right. Their work may look like this then:

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Kids should have less homework because...

- kids have many responsibilities and activities
- much of the homework is busy work
- it is too much for the teacher to grade anyways

In other words, if you choose to have students plan in this way, you will need to teach them that in order to support their claim, one thing writers do is to come up with supportive reasoning for their claim—why it is right, why you as the reader should be convinced. For many students the familiar boxes-and-bullets will still be the best form of an essay for their argument, and the debate has simply helped them to make their reasoning more persuasive. For other students, however, it may make more sense for their essays to directly argue with those who may disagree, by writing three- to four-paragraph essays that follow a structure as follows:

Thesis

- I think . . .
- You may think . . . but . . .

Once they have sketched out a plan for their essays, you will send them off immediately to draft flash essays. You may want to quickly help them see how their essays may go.

As students begin to draft, you will want to remind your students of how most essays go. That is, you will want to remind them that they should use what they know about introductions, body paragraphs, and so on. The RWP classroom teachers teach their students to be especially careful when choosing their language because much of persuasion rests not so much on what we say as in how we say it. Make sure that your students know that they should be extra sure to choose words that mean exactly what they are trying to say, and that they are careful not to either exaggerate or underwhelm their ideas. Students can always use their writing partners to help find the words they are searching for. Acting out what you are trying to say persuasively can help students feel their conviction, and from this conviction comes their voice.

This part in the essay unit is about writing drafts quickly and furiously, tucking in strategies as we go, so many teachers choose to have their students write a few of these flash-drafts before moving on to revision. This has made essay writing an energetic and productive time of the year, and at the RWP we feel that this is the right direction to go. If your students are writing flash-drafts each day, then you will want to help them make each draft better than the one before. Brief, vivid anecdotes that bear on the issue will help make their essays alive, full of voice, and very convincing. You could remind your class that in the personal essay unit they learned to write other people's stories as well as their own, and that in persuasive writing these stories become great backup for our own thinking. Mentor texts provide inspiration for other types of material kids will want to collect. For example, many well-written pieces of persuasive writing rely on an image that functions as a central metaphor. You could also teach the children that

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nothing is more persuasive than facts. Writers who want to hit home use precise information to do so, and this could mean that, as part of this unit, a teacher will teach students how to use the Internet to search for precise evidence such as statistics or a quotation to illustrate a topic sentence. Your decision will depend on several factors, including time and access to technology.

Any of these strategies can help your students lift the level of their writing as they flash-draft essays, or you can use them as revision strategies later on. Some may work as whole-class lessons, while others can serve as your small-group instruction or conference work.

Bend Three – Revising Persuasive Essays

After a few days of drafting a few essays, you will most likely see your students producing well-structured, well backed-up, somewhat persuasive essays. When you teach them to revise one or two of their essays for publication, then you might want to focus on the somewhat persuasive part, helping them to make their essays as persuasive as possible. You may gather your students around you again, congratulating them on the work they have done so far, and then saying something like, “Writers, you are at a critical point in your writing. You have good arguments about great ideas. The problem is that a good argument may not win the debate. We need great arguments. And the way to make our arguments great is to make sure there are no holes in them.” Certainly here you could weave a connection to the times students have argued with their parents over a late night or new toy, pointing out that to convince a parent to bend, your argument needs to be air-tight, not just good enough.

The RWP research has found that sending your writers back to their writing partners is a good way to help them find any counterarguments that need addressing in their essays. They can read their essays to their writing partners, and their writing partners will take the stance once again as the opponent to their argument, looking for places to disagree. If the essayist reads, “One reason why cats are better than dogs is that cats don’t need to be taken on long walks in the cold,” our writing partner will jump in with, “Yeah, but you have to change their litter box and that is totally gross.” We will want to teach our writers to address this counter-argument using phrases like, “While some people argue . . . in fact . . .” or “Some people think . . . but I think . . .”. For example, our writer will revise his essay by adding in, “Some people think that cleaning out the litter box is worse than taking dogs out for walks, but I think that walking dogs in the winter or in the rain is worse because it lasts for much longer.” By writing directly to the possible disagreements, our writers will strengthen their arguments and their essay writing.

In addition the RWP suggests that you spend some time in this unit teaching your students how to find credible, relevant information that backs up their thinking. The Common Core State Standards lay out three skills that students should become more adept with concerning research. The first is to be able to research things (articles, images) relatively quickly, on the Internet or elsewhere (W 6.7). You will want to teach your students that one thing researchers do is they come up with some different search phrases to help them find what they are looking for. In addition, the CCSS addresses credibility (W 6.8). Of course we know that anyone can come up

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with a website and say what they want—and that this does not count as “credibility,” and so we will want to teach kids that one way you decide whether or not a website is credible is to read across at least three websites, so you can look for inconsistencies, or pay attention to who the author of that website is, and whether or not they have credentials, are an expert in the field, or belong to a publishing company or magazine. Of course you might also want to give your kids list of commonly used credible websites—but remember that part of the Standards is about asking kids to decide what is credible and what is not, and so if you give them the websites they should use eliminates the need for this skill.

Lastly we will want to teach our students to pull out relevant evidence from the sources they deem credible (W 6.9) and one way the RWP has seen students succeed here is to have them write out their claim, or the ideas for which they are searching for evidence, on a Post-it, and then as they read articles they carry these Post-its with them, looking for matches between the ideas they are researching and the information on the page.

Along the way you will want to highlight a few revision goals. Most important, teach students that writers reread and revise, taking our readers into account. Teach them that writers pretend to be our own readers. We step outside of ourselves, pick up the text as if we have never seen it before, and we read it. We notice the sections that are convincing, and those that make us flick the paper away. We notice where the draft loses energy, and where it makes the reader feel skeptical. Of course, revision is another time for studying mentor texts. Teach students to go back to their pieces and try out the kinds of rhetorical gestures that their mentors have made, including the use of purposeful repetition (as in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech) and the use of “zingers” that drive home the point in a quotable way. If your students have done outside research, you can teach them to paraphrase that information here, being sure to show them how to either cite their source inside of the text or as a separate works cited page.

Many RWP classroom teachers have chosen to make this publication a bigger deal than other essay celebrations: leaning on the persuasive elements and holding debates, filming essays as speeches, or having students create podcasts around their work. If we have been pushing our students to write as persuasively as possible, we will also want to help them try to make a difference in the world by making sure their writing gets into the hands of people who could be changed by it. However you celebrate, be sure to remind your students of all they have learned in this weighty unit. They will have, in their rigor and stamina, found that their essay writing muscles have developed exponentially.

Editing and Grammar Support Writing Workshop

Now that your year is well underway, it is a good time to raise the bar on your students’ grammar expectations. By now in your year you should have a sense of the strands of conventions work your students are undertaking. Essay is a great opportunity to look to tense, if that is work you have been developing in your room. Noticing how in anecdotes that take place in the past, verbs should be conjugated to match that time period, whereas when the voice of the essay flips back

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to narration or ideas, writers may either stick with past tense or decide to use present. Alternatively, you might decide to have your students look at sentence combining. Students have a difficult time recognizing that a sentence can be simple: The cat ate the fish; compound: The cat took the fish and buried it in the garden; or complex: The cat ate the fish because he could not dig a hole in the concrete. The work begun in this unit will lay the foundation for more challenging work, such as fragments, later in the year.

This is also the perfect time to revisit paragraphing of new ideas. Persuasive writing provides an opportunity to remind students about when and where to use paragraphs to signal a new idea. In addition, students are ready to investigate abstract vocabulary that signals connections: *and, thus, furthermore, rather*; compares or contrasts a viewpoint: *however, on the other hand*; or interjections: *or, yet* (when used to advance an idea). This inquiry work might begin in read-aloud where you might begin to tune your students' ears to hear the words that signal agreement, viewpoint, or interjection. Collect the words on a chart by category. Students can use this resource when writing notebook entries or drafts.

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